

Study of incarceration indicts U.S. 'culture'

by Marianna Wertz

A report released in September by The Sentencing Project, a Washington, D.C. think-tank, on "The International Use of Incarceration, 1992-93," points to the central role of the "cultural attitudes of a society" in the widely disparate lengths of incarceration internationally, with post-communist Russia and the United States in the lead.

As can be seen in **Figure 1**, the rates of incarceration can be broken down into two groups: The first includes post-communist Russia, the United States, and South Africa (under apartheid); the second includes everybody else. To begin to explain this sentencing discrepancy, the report gives the following background on U.S. rates:

- U.S. incarceration rates have increased by 22%, from 426 per 100,000 in 1989 to 519 per 100,000 for 1992-93, which is five to eight times the rate of Canada and most European nations.

- With a total of 1.3 million inmates, at an estimated annual cost of \$20,000 each, the national cost of imprisonment in the United States is approximately \$26.8 billion.

- The rate of incarceration for African-Americans is a major component: For males and females combined, it is 1,947 per 100,000, compared to 306 for whites, and blacks comprise nearly 50% of all inmates in U.S. prisons and jails—626,207—compared to 658,233 whites, despite their comprising less than 20% of the general population. More black males are incarcerated in the United States than are enrolled in higher education (583,000 versus 537,000).

It is not that there is more crime in the United States. The report refutes this. It states: "A comprehensive survey of victimization rates in the industrialized world conducted by the Dutch Ministry of Justice [in 1992] documented that rates of property crime and some assaultive crimes in the U.S. are not significantly different than in many comparable nations."

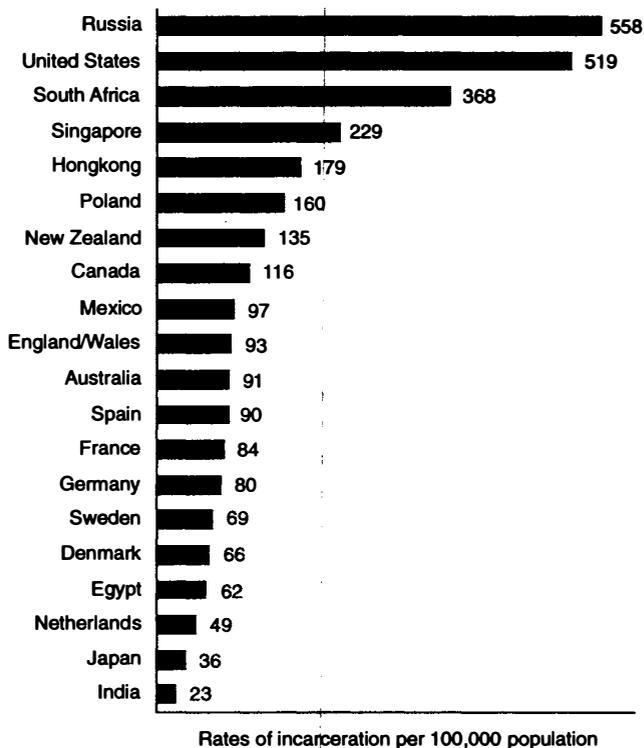
What The Sentencing Project found, instead, is that U.S. sentences are disproportionately longer for the same crime than in western European nations, and that a combination of skyrocketing drug-offense incarcerations and fixed-term sentencing are the main culprits. For instance, for every 1,000 arrests, the commitment rate to state prison has increased 447% for drugs from 1980 to 1992.

"The most substantial explanation" for these facts, "lies in the cultural attitudes of a society; that is, what most people would consider the 'right' punishment." Quoting research by Wilkins and Pease (in *Crime and Justice: A Review of*

Research, 1993), they report, "a society's penal climate or its relative punitiveness is linked to its relative egalitarianism: The greater a society's tolerance of inequality, the more extreme the scale of punishment utilized." Thus, such nations as the United States and South Africa, where racial divisions are strong and where a greater disparity of wealth exists than in most other industrialized nations, "will be more likely to display harsher cultural attitudes toward sentencing policy than a nation with a broader social welfare system."

The Russian case is most interesting in this regard. Russia leapt over the United States to lead the list of incarceration rates only after the fall of communism—at least assuming, as the report does, that official Soviet statistics bore some relationship to reality. *EIR* has reported on the rise of mafia-based crime in Russia since 1989 (see Sept. 9, 1994 for the most recent report). The Sentencing Project finds, "As the country moves toward a market economy, the social disruption and loss of a limited social 'safety net' for some may contribute to high crime rates." If it is the "free enterprise" culture that has led the United States and Russia to incarcerate so many of their citizens it is time to re-think that culture. As The Sentencing Project concludes, "if a society is committed to lowering its rate of incarceration, either on fiscal or moral grounds, an overall reevaluation of cultural attitudes and values that determine sentencing policy needs to be initiated."

FIGURE 1
Incarceration rates for selected nations



Source: The Sentencing Project

* Figures are unavailable for China, Cuba, and Saudi Arabia.